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Death, Life and the Barzakh in Cairo's Cemeteries:The place of the cemetery in the sacred geography of late Medieval Cairo

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I- CONTEXTUALISATION (1)
SITE AND HISTORY

The first of Cairo's cemeteries, al-Qarafa, was established at the foot of al-Muqattam to the east of al-Fustat, the first Islamic capital of Egypt. With the change in dynastic rules, new capitals were established each to the north of the former, and the cemetery developed northwards in parallel almost always outside the city proper. One exception was the cemetery that grew outside the grave al-Sayyida Nafisa, the granddaughter of the grandson of the prophet, dug for herself in her house in 825. Her husband was begged not to take her body outside Egypt for burial; "By God do not deprive us of her, whenever a misfortune befell us, we would go to her and ask her to pray for us and the misfortune would be lifted. Leave her in our land, and if we are struck by misfortune we will come to her grave and ask God (for help) at her grave".

When the Fatimids took Egypt and made it their centre of rule, they established the walled city of al-Qahira, to the north of the conglomerate of al-Fustat and the later capitals. Two cemeteries grew around al-Qahira, one outside its north gate (Bab al-Nasr) and one outside its south gate (Bab Zuwayla). The Fatimids themselves buried their dead inside al-Qahira but they also built a congregational mosque in al-Qarafa and built a funerary/residential complex there in which they re-interred their dead brought with them from the Maghrib. A complex comprising a congregational mosque, a palace, a bath, a bakery, a garden, a cistern, a mill and animal stables was built between the years 976 and 1126. The Fatimid Sultan al-Amir would sit in his manzara, in the






Shafi'i's grave. Ibn Jubayr, who visited the complex as it was being built in 1183 describes it as, "a madrasa the like of which (in size and magnificence) this country had never seen. It seemed to the visitor that it was city on its own. Opposite it was the hammam (bath) and the rest of its service buildings". The cemetery itself is , "remarkable for being built-up with mosques and inhabited shrines in which lodge strangers, learned men, the good, and the poor (or sufis). The subsidy for these establishments comes monthly from the Sultan""

THE REIGN OF AL-NASIR MUHAMMAD IBN QALAWUN

The Mamluks continued to develop the area round al-Shaf'i which then started to be known as al-Qarafa al-Sughra. Under al-Nasir Muhammad (r. 1294-1340 int.), Cairo reached its widest expansion and activities in the cemetery diversified and increased as did the debate over its very nature.
"With the start of al-Nasir Muhammad ibn Qalawun's third reign in the year 711 (H), many new buildings, palaces and otherwise were built in the Citadel, and several tombs appeared in the area between the Citadel and Qubbat al-Nasr .. The Qarafa was also urbanized ('amar); north to south, from Bab al-Qarafa to Birkat al-Habash , and west to east, from al-Qarafa al-Kubra to al-Jabal .. the buildings of Misr and al-Qahira merged into one city.

Al-Nasir's passion for building was copied by his court. Funerary complexes comprising a family tomb and a religious establishment (madrasa, khanqa or a charitable sabil for example) were very popular and a lot of them were built in the cemetery. Mainstream 'Ulama lived in the vicinity of the madrasas where they worked and sufis occupied khanqas and ribats. Ascetics also lived there alone or, often unwillingly, surrounded by a congregation. They were all visited frequently by performers of ziyara or cultic visitation who were interested in walis (friends of God), both live and dead. There were special visits on special days led by ziyara shaykhs some of whom wrote guidebooks pointing out the tombs of the holy and the righteous. Visitors stopped and prayed at certain tombs, asking the pious dead to intercede with God on their behalf. They also sought certain keepsakes from the vicinity of some graves, perhaps some earth for example to cure certain illnesses. Other proofs of sanctity were unexplained lights or pleasant smells that could be experienced around certain graves. It was also standard for people, particularly women to visit their dead and possibly stay overnight. The cemeteries were particularly crowded in festivals where the rich distributed food for the poor and Qur'an was recited and dhikr sessions were held. These celebrations were attended by people from all walks of life. At times of strife, during drought, plague or famine the cemeteries were the place to go for prayer.

The efficacy of these activities, in fact their legality was not accepted by all. There was a serious divide between the esoteric side of Islamic thought and the exoteric traditionalist view as to how 'Islamic' these practices were. While the debate attracted many views, the writings of the Hanbali Shaykh Ibn Taymiyya are the most lucid representatives of formalist traditionalist Islam, while those of Ibn 'Arabi (though written about 100 years earlier) directed sufi thought and were always cited on both sides of the divide in the discussion. Certain writers also wrote specifically about the practice of ziyara in a positive way to counteract the mainly Hanbali attacks. In my discussion of the political climate of the time, I will mostly draw upon the works of Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn 'Arabi and contemporary discussions and responsa to their works. At the heart of this debate over the cemetery and the cult of saints was a disagreement on the very concept of sanctity in Islam.

II- PLACE AND MEANING (1)
URBAN TO SACRED GEOGRAPHY

The cemetery, as it developed in Cairo, is controversial. It goes against universal conceptions of what a successful urban place should be or what a funerary zone should look like; in short it is a combination of both. The range of activities mentioned above have varied from funerary to religious education to residential to entertainment to trade, sometimes simultaneously in the same space or establishment. The cemetery obviously does not conform to ideas through time of what is acceptable in an urban space, yet at the same time it is





According to Taylor, it as a Turnerian 'liminal zone' in urban geography, and it is indispensable because of that. Liminality is a threshold state between the two main modalities of social relationship; structure in which individuals are segmentalized into roles and statuses within a structured, differentiated and often hierarchical system of politico-legal-economic positions and communitas where recognition is given to to an essential and generic human bond , without which there could be no society . The cemetery is thus a liminal zone because it provides a space for alternative social activities and possibly for quasi-religious activities both of which are less restricted there by the structure of the mainstream religious establishment.

Ostensibly harmless religious activities, such as visiting the dead or listening to religious singing, could verge on the reprehensible when the establishment was not present to maintain structure. People gathered in al-Qarafa to listen to a religious singer were reprimanded by a shaykh because what brought them was the beauty of his voice not the exalted meanings they were supposed to meditate on. While the practice of women visiting the cemetery unchaperoned, possibly accompanied by the owner of a hired mule was seen as scandalous by traditionalist 'ulama'. The cemetery lent itself easily to this sort of alternative (mis)use through subversion.

This leads to the main purpose of this enquiry; the place of the cemetery in the sacred geography of Cairo. Does the cemetery also lie somewhere in between the sacred and secular? Is it a liminal zone between the Sacred and Profane as it is between the worlds of the Dead and the Living, and Structure and Communitas? The three versions of liminality are implied by this passage and poem;

"I stayed overnight a number of times in al-Qarafa of al-Fustat . . it has a congregational mosque and numerous tombs endowed with waqfs for Qur'an reciters and large Shaf'i madrasas. It is rarely free of singing especially on moonlit nights. It is the most frequented meeting place for the people of Misr and their most famous excursion spot.

About it I say:

Al-Qarafa contains two opposites
this world and the hereafter, it is thus the best residence

The profligate ignoring it, continues with his misdeeds
while the ascetic roams its tombs

We stayed there many a night and our companion
was a tune from which a waterfall almost flows .."

To understand what lies betwen the Sacred and the Profane, it is necessary to know where they themselves lie, to pinpoint their boundaries. The concept of the Sacred in Islam varies considerably according to its spatio-temporal context. In fact it is rare that there is total consensus at any given time in any given place between different factions of the society as to the scope of the Sacred.

## III- PLACE AND MEANING (2)
## THE SACRED, THE PROFANE AND BARAKA

It is important for the semantics of the discussion to pinpoint the understanding of the Sacred and the Profane in the Western academic discipline of the 20th C. The two theorists who have tended to use these words in conjunction (and in opposition) are Mircea Eliade and Emile Durkheim and their interpretations diverge. According to Eliade, the Sacred is altogether otherwordly, in distinction from the Profane. Space, to the religious





religion through society. Religion and religious ritual is society celebrating itself. The Sacred is thus, according to him, society. Again, as with Eliade, It is a world apart, opposed to the Profane, the everday, the normal. It exists because man has a natural capacity to idealize, that is, to replace the real world with a different one to which he travels in thought. This world is inspired by collective life i.e. society and it both expresses and maintains it.

At first glance, the theories seem not to converge. Yet they agree on two very important points. Firstly that the two poles of the Sacred and Profane exist in opposition. There is a sharp boundary between them or in Durkheim's case a gap that should not be bridged. The other point is that there are no degrees of sanctity, there is only The Sacred. This is difficult to reconcile with the hierarchy of the sacreds in Islam. There is primarily the first distinction between sanctity and divinity. Only God is divine, he transcends all. The principle dogma of Islam, la illah illa allah, has been translated by Seyyed Hossein Nasr as ‘There is no divinity but the Divine' . Then comes the rest of the sacred, which again must be of differing levels of intensity. So in the case of sacred place, there is the Ka‘ba to which all who can must travel, then there are three mosques to which people are encouraged to travel to pray, al-Haram Mosque in Mecca, the Mosque of Medina and al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem . All other mosques require respect and have a kind of sanctity because of their function but the site they are on is not inherently sacred. It loses its sanctity if it is no longer used for prayer. It is also possible to argue for different kinds of sanctity. For example, the earth of the tombs of prophets is of a certain kind of sanctity (fadl/merit) yet that does not cancel the inhibition against praying in burial grounds. This inhibition is related to the early Muslim horror of following pre-Islamic rituals, be those Judeo-Christian or of the Jahiliyya. A hadith thus says; “Those before you used tombs as mosques, I forbid you from doing that”.

While it is not the purpose of this study to deal with the different variations and nomenclatures of sanctity, it is already becoming clear that a number of words are used and that they designate different degrees and different types of all that pertains to the Sacred. The word fadl, used above, denotes a general merit. On the other side of the spectrum, the word used only for the ka‘ba and the three major mosques and their site is haram.

A number of words are used in the sources for the Sacred and Sacred-like in the context of the cemetery. Ibn ‘Uthman tells us, “If you want to know the ‘sharaf' of the land (how honorable the land is), look to those buried in it.” The word sharaf, meaning honour or glory, is also used in conjunction with the ka‘ba (al-ka‘ba al-sharifa) and with the descendents of the prophet or ahl al-bayt (al-ashraf). The word quds is that closest in meaning to sacred (muqaddas literally means ‘made sacred') or sanctity (qudsiyya). One of God's ninety nine names is al-quddus (the all-holy). Jerusalem is also called bayt al-maqdis and Mecca & Medina al-aradi al-muqaddasa. Its use in conjunction with the cemetery is rare. This is one of the few cases I have come across.

Above the Qarafa lies al-Muqattam. It is not high, it has no vegetation but is visited for its baraka . . It is agreed that nowhere in the world is there a more wondrous cemetery or a more beautiful or a greater one . . muqaddasa in all books.

The other word that features in the above passage, baraka, is the one that is most commonly associated with the cemetery. In fact this word is key in understanding the latter's special nature. Baraka can be translated as an effusion of blessing or grace. Bousquet, who wrote an article looking at parallels between baraka in Islam and other “beneficient emanations that flow from sacred things and entities”, likens it to mana in primitive religions. He also recounts a story in the new testament where a woman takes Jesus by surprise and touches him hoping to be cured of an ailment. She is cured, but more importantly, Jesus says he felt a “force leaving him.” . Taylor, on the other hand, compares the particular baraka obtained from keepsakes taken from the vicinity of saints' graves to that of praesentia, or “the physical presence of the holy”, in the cult of Christian saints in late antiquity. Baraka is thus not the sacred per se but a force emanating from the sacred, or a physical reminder of it - Sanctity by association or Sanctity of the second degree.






"It is said the Jabal Misr was one of the most covered with trees and plants and fruit . . In the night when God talked to Moses peace be upon him, He revealed to the mountains . . "On one of you mountains stands one of my prophets." All the mountains were uplifted except al-Quds - it subsided and quailed. The God asked it, "Why did you do that?", although He knew most. It said in veneration of Your greatness oh God. God then ordered the mountains to present it each with something of its vegetation . . al-Muqattam gave it all that was on it till it became (barren) as we see it today. So God told it, "I will compensate you with the trees of paradise or the seedlings of paradise meaning the faithful".

It has an indirect connection with the holy mountain on which Moses stood because it gave it all its vegetation, in fact it is part of the sacred mountain, or axis mundi, the centre of the universe.
The mountain of al-Muqattam eastern-most extremity is in China where the Pacific Ocean is. It then passes through the land of the Tartars ... till it reaches the Indian Ocean where it bends and stretches to Sharazawr and passes by the river of Dijla and connects to the mountain of al-Juda where the ship of Noah docked after the deluge and it continues . . till it crosses the sea and becomes al-Muqattam ..

Jesus Christ also passed by and foresaw the burial of the Muslims there. Yahuda, the brother of Yusuf (Joseph) used to live there.

"'Isa ibn Maryam (peace be upon him) passed by Jabal Misr (al-Muqattam) with his mother. His mother said; "Son, we have passed by many mountains but we have yet to see one as luminous as this one. He said those to be buried here are the nation of my brother Muhammad. This mountain is the seedlings of heaven and its gardens."

More importantly it provides a connection to heaven. It contains the seedlings of heaven which the Caliph 'Umar ibn al-Khattab decided could only be the Muslim dead. The choice of site is associated with the following legend;

"Al-Muqawqas asked 'Amr ibn al-'As to sell him (the foot of al-Muqattam) for 70,000 dinars .. 'Amr was surprised and he wrote to 'Umar ibn al-Khattab of that, describing the foot (of the mountain) as a waterless uncultivable place. Then 'Umar wrote back and said, "Ask him why he offered you what he did when it is barren and waterless .. So he ('Amr) asked him (al-Muqawqas) who said, "We can find a description of this spot and it says that it contains the seedlings of paradise (ghiras al-janna) .. Umar wrote back, "The only seeds of paradise we know of are the faithful, therefore bury in it those of the faithful who died before you and do not sell him anything."

There is also a promise that a good number of those buried there will go to heaven without being judged.

30,000 liwa' (brigades) of those buried under it will be gathered to heaven without judgement.

Al-Muqattam is thus an Eliadian sacred place par-excellence. It has witnessed God, his prophets and members of their family. It is a sacred mountain connected to Jabal Musa and Noah's mountain. It is also a gateway to heaven. A perfect place for the burial of the Muslim dead.

The first observation to be made is that the myths are mostly related to pre-Islamic Judeo-Christian events. It is thus only natural that Ka'b al-Ahbar, a Jewish 'alim who converted to Islam would ask for dust from it to lay under his grave.

Ka'b al-Ahbar asked a man going to Egypt to bring him soil from the foot of its Muqattam. It is said in books that God has made from al-Qusayr to al-Yahmum sacred (qaddasahu). The man got him a pouchful and when Ka'b al-Ahbar was about to die he asked that it be spread under his side in his grave.






enrich the heavens. It is a less exclusive concept of sacred place. In a way, sacred place is not just "there" to be discovered, a degree of sanctity - maybe of a different kind - can be achieved by humans simply through the act of being good Muslims.

VI- CONTEXTUALISATION (2)
TRANSCENDENCE vs. IMMANENCE and ISLAMIC SACREDS
In an article on the concept of the Sacred Place in Islam, Clinton Bennett argues that, "while Islam does . . designate certain places as sacred, it never loses sight of its fundamental conviction that all space is sacred place, and through worship , architecture and traditional town planning tries to sacralise all space by extending the 'sacred' into the 'secular'." According to him, the sacred does not have to be otherwordly, but could be part and parcel of social inter-action. It would not be stretching his point too far to consider being part of the ummah , as a kind of manifestation of sanctity - a more metaphysical yet in a sense, normative, variation of Durkheim's sacred. Moreover, a place's acquired sanctity through association with a religious figure is "thereafter reinforced by the ritual ablutions and regular prayers of generations of worshippers . . The powerful symbolism of these places and historical associations outwardly reflect the Muslim's inner personal experience of Iman (faith)." Bennett relates this interpretation of the Sacred to the concept of Tawhid (unity), the main dogma of Islam. In a way, he combines the esoteric and exoteric interpretations of Sacred Place in one argument. All of earth is potentially sacred if Muslims carry out their prescribed duties in it (exoteric). All of earth is potentially sacred as it is a manifestation of God's will (esoteric).

THE EXOTERIC SACRED
The main message of Islam is Tawhid. It is the assertion that God is one, but it could also be related to tawhid in belief and action. The Profane is made Sacred if it follows the teachings of Islam - if it is halal. And this is the source of baraka in visiting the dead. The Prophet encouraged Muslims to do so, thus if they do it and follow the prescribed behaviour, the Profane becomes Sacred. Hanbalis in particular take a practice-oriented view of good Islam. It is how a man or woman behaves that determines how good a Muslim i.e. how potentially sacred (seedling of heaven) they are. And it is how much of Islamic activity takes place in a space that determines how sacred it becomes.

Therefore, for them, baraka as a kind of grace brought about by the practice of prescribed duties. On the other hand, Hanbalis would have had great problems accepting most of the other sources of sanctity described above. These were not truly Islamic in the sense that they were not affirmed in the tradition of the forebears. They also depended too much on Judeo-Christian tradition and they implied that it was possible for certain spots on the earth to have a certain sanctity - attribute of God - and that would place the idea of transcendence of God in jeopardy.

This exoteric extreme is related to the care taken to keep the sanctity of God unimpaired. God is transcendent. He is of another world. He is the only Quddus. (all sacred) everything else is muqaddas at most (made sacred). And of those there are ony three places that we know of that are inherently sacred, Mecca, the mosque at Medina and al-Aqsa in Jerusalem. The rest of the earth is what we make of it through our actions. For example while the concept of the 'Sacred Mountain' as discussed above was one present in the popular consciousness at the time, it was frowned on by traditionalist Islam. One of the judgements of Ibn Taymiyya is in answer to a question about the sanctity of Jabal Lubnan. He explains that the only three places with inherent (lazima) sanctity are the three harams. Other sites could gain importance in local memory because they are frontier sites thaghrs related to acts of Muslim piety such as defence of Dar al-Islam but this transient merit that is not specific to a place ('arida) .

THE ESOTERIC SACRED
The other side of the spectrum is the idea of the transcendent immanence of God, most cogently argued by Ibn 'Arabi and his followers. Implicit in the doctrine of wihdat al-wujud, (the transcendent unity of being), is the belief that man can reach a kind of perfection (reach an awareness of himself as a version of the macrocosmic






The cosmological parallel of wihdat al-wujud is the principle of tasi‘ al-kun, where nature is universalized into a principle that transcends the world of forms. This theory of Ibn ‘Arabi has led to him being accused of pantheism, especially when coupled with his theory of mutable entities (the primordial concepts of future creation that had existed in divine consciousness) later translated by his critics as a belief in dahriyya or eternity of the cosmos. The gulf between God and his creations, so important to traditionalists and ash‘arists somehow can be crossed through tashbih (immanence or symbolism). Thus the whole cosmic manifestation is connected to the Divine Principle through its very existence, without undermining the fact that the world is totally other than God. The universe is infused with an immanation of grace, of the Sacred. In other words the whole of the earth has an inherent potential for baraka.

VII- PLACE AND MEANING (4)
SANCTITY THROUGH DEATH / SANCTITY THROUGH LIVING

The second source of sanctity has to do with the nature of the Qarafa as a burial ground. There are of course different categories of Muslim dead. There are friends and family, and there are walis. The cemetery also housed live walis and‘ulama in its little oratories, its vast sufi khanqas and its religious colleges; an added complication.

The ‘normal' dead were not controversial. Their presence generated a mild kind of reciprocal baraka. The Muslim were encouraged to visit their dead. It was a good reminder of the ephemeral character of dunya (life on earth). They were also encouraged to offer supplicatory prayer (du‘a') for the dead. That added to the good deeds of the dead , it also added to the good deeds of the living who were following God's instructions, acting virtuously. Thus the presence of good Muslims and du‘a' bestowed a kind of sanctity to the place. All in all, a Hanbali form of the Sacred.

But where were the dead? This question has been subject to a long debate, especially that it is related to two issues of grave importance; That of adhab al-qabr, or punishment in the grave and that of the status of the wali. Opinions vary , but there is a general agreement that the intermediate stage between death and ressurection called, al-barzakh or dar al-barzakh, exists. It seems to have both a temporal and spatial dimension. The barzakh is both the time between death and resurrection and the link between heaven and earth. Spatially it includes the grave, which remains the main abode of the dead. This is because, although God takes the spirit at death, it returns to the body for the first judgement which determines what the grave will be like; part of heaven or part of earth. Although the spirit is not perpetually bound to the grave, it has a special connection to it. Therefore if someone were to visit and greet the dead, it returns instantaneously to the body. It is, as Ecklund puts it, “perpetually at home to receive visitors”. Thus it seems that although nothing prevents the spirit as it moves in the parallel (yet encompassing) universe of the barzakh from hearing du‘a' dedicated to them, it is more seemly to do it closer to their graves, their abode. It of course, goes without saying that it is aware of the living if they are offering prayers for it. He then declares, “ It is not merely longing to keep the departed in remembrance that has called forth this custom (of visiting the dead), it implies, as traditionary writings enjoin, a real visit to the dead, who will hereby be given a pleasure.”

The above-mentioned account of the barzakh has been taken from the treatise of Ibn Qayim al-Jawziyya as he is the closest historically and geographically to the period and zone under discussion. His understanding of the relationship between the dead and the living is also closest to that implied, but not really discussed, in the ziyara books. Even in other understandings of the barzakh, where the dead are not so active or aware and the cemetery is not as crowded with spirits, the right ones are still there to provide baraka. According to al-Suyuti (d. 1505), there are only two categories, the blessed and the punished. The punished are too busy being punished to do anything else. The blessed are allowed to move freely, usually in the barzakh, but are bound to their graves and return to them frequently, almost always on Friday eves. While according to al-Ghazali (d. 1111), the sinners stay below ground where they are given a taste of punishment to come. The second category of dead, the good






This leads to the second, more important source of baraka, the walis, both dead and alive. Their baraka is related to their pious nature and deeds, their graves can be seen by some as a potential guide to Divine mercy in the afterlife. In the meantime, it is also related to their ability to intervene with God on the supplicant's behalf.

“Wherever one of my companions dies, he will be resurrected as the leader and (guiding light) for its people on resurrection day”.

If you want to know the sharaf' of the land (how honorable the land is), look to those buried in it.

Know that the graves of the righteous (salihin) are never void of baraka and that he who visits them, greets their inhabitants, recites (quran) and prays for them will only get good (khayr) and reward (ajr). This may manifest itself in an auspicious sign to him.

Ziyara as a practice is the embodiment of these beliefs. As seen above, Muslims joined the organized tours of the cemetery, either regularly or occasionally to remember death, to learn about the previous deeds of the righteous, to catch a glimpse of live saints, but also to pray at auspicious spots. The guidebooks indiscriminately mention the merits of certain spots and the property of du‘a' being answered is high on the list and is usually related to the burial of famously pious dead. According to Taylor, ziyara guides or guidebooks “provided a a kind of map of sacred space in al-Qarafa, pinpointing the specific locations of great reservoirs of baraka where the zuwwar might come to seek active assistance and intercession of the saints or simply to benefit from close proximity to the divine blessing that engulfed their tomb.”

For example, Ibn al-Zayyat describes the tomb of al-Sayyida Nafisa as “a lofty place known for the granting of du‘a'” He then lists a pageful of figures of varying importance who prayed at her grave. It should be said here that the belief that walis and prophets are aware of the living and free to move around after death is implicit in this practice. Al-Sayyida Nafisa was often asked to pray for the people when she was alive as seen above, and the reason why Egyptians fought so hard to keep her is so that she may continue doing so after her death.

While the live walis and qutbs with their karamas are representations of various stages of the hierarchy that leads to Ibn ‘Arabi's insan kamil, the dead ones in their graves combine between the merits of this transcendant superhuman and those of the earth as an “effusion of Being” as Ibn Sina would say. The grave of the wali is thus a doublefold repository of baraka through immanence. The wali has reached a degree of sanctity through transcendence and his grave, by virtue of him being buried there, is a concentration of the Sacred inherent in the cosmos.

The understanding of the dynamics of this baraka can differ. Ibn Taymiyya in a largely disapproving account of the whole business puts it succinctly; People can ask the person buried to grant certain wishes. That to Ibn Taymiyya is paramount to shirk (idolatory). The second degree is to ask the religious figure to intercede (shafa‘a) with God on the supplicant's behalf because he is closer to God. That again is illegal but not as reprehensible as the first case. The third case is to ask God to grant certain wishes by virtue of the baraka of the person buried there. That is only permissible in the case of the prophet. Ibn Taymiyya adds a further twist to his last judgement by saying, that, in that case, being at his grave does not make the du‘a' more efficacious, it can be done from anywhere.

The first case was frowned upon by almost all the religious establishment, including sufis. The second and third case were generally accepted as legal by most, both for walis and for prophets. Ibn Taymiyya's views incited such a backlash, that he was imprisoned twice and ordered to retract them. In the eyes of most, visiting the cemetery's walis, both dead and alive, was a pious activity. They were reminded of their stories and karamat, all of which, in a way, confirmed God's omnipresence and closeness as they are all only possible through the will of






THE BARZAKH - LINK AND BARRIER BETWEEN THE DIVINITY AND THE REST

Even Ibn Taymiyya himself did not deny the special merits that would come upon a place when the pious are buried in it.

“The fact that these places are avoided by the evil spirits and animals, the immunity from fire to these places and their visitors, the intercession of some saints for those buried near them, the commendability of being buried near such saints, attainment of grace in their neighbourhood and visitation of chastisement upon those who make light of them - these things are all true.”

He also did not deny seekers of God's mercy the right to ask the living pious to pray for them. It was the idea of intervention through transcendence that he opposed. As he did the increased veneration of the dead for fear of emulation of pre-Islamic practices. The living should not seek the dead for help because they are in no way superior or closer to God than them. God made the surface of the earth for the living and its core for the dead and neither is of more merit than the other. Forms of contact while not absolutely denied, should not be believed in or acted on in an exaggerated way. Implicit in this argument is a distaste for non-traditionalist attempts to attain God's Grace through anything other than pious acts, beliefs that could endanger the transcendence of God through attempts to break the natural order of things by mixing life with the after life. The barzakh, while it creates a link between the two worlds, also denies mixing, as the freshwater of river flows into the sea, but it is not contaminated by its saltwater. On the other hand, in the Qur'anic verse that uses the word in the context of life and the afterlife, the dead ask to return to the land of the living to make right their wrongs and God refuses.“Verily these are the words which he shall speak: but behind them there shall be a barzakh, until the day of resurrection.

Yet it is primarily a belief in the possibility of catching a glimpse of the afterlife, or attaining some emanation of its promise of heaven through ziyara that made the cemetery so attractive. Its liminality between life and the afterlife is asserted again and again. It is not sacred in the sense that the three harams are sacred. Its form of baraka is the Barzakh between the Sacred and the Profane and that Barzakh is not as impeneterable as Ibn Taymiyya would have us believe.

Ibn ‘Arabi's interpretation of the verses in the Qur'an about the two barzakhs, is highly illuminating. He sees the imagery as an allegory for the seeker in the sufi tariqa's attempt to reach God. The barzakh is represented as the intermediary between the body (saltwater/life) and the free spirit (freshwater/afterlife). It is not the case that this can only be attained through death. In fact, the true sufi tries to attain this stage while living.
For the individual man, the quest to seek understanding of God is a quest to understand himself as a microcosm of the insan kamil who himself is also described in sufi treatises as a barzakh, ‘an isthmus between God and the Cosmos” . Walis are able to reach degrees of this stage in this life. Ibn ‘Arabi himself is sometimes referred to as Barzakh al-Barazikh.

Ecklund describes the concept of this intermediate stage between life and death as “a genuine Islamic product, a rare phenomenon in the eschatological market.” and without it , the practice of ziyara and saint veneration would not have been that popular or that controversial. With the identification of the cemetery with the barzakh as a place of liminality between heaven and earth, came the promise of at least partial ascension to the heavens for the everyman by proxy, through the reflected baraka emanating from the wali and his grave .

The cemetery is also important for understanding concepts of the Sacred because it allowed for extremes in practice, beliefs and reactions. The Sacreds were of varying intensity and of different qualities. Pre-Islamic beliefs in the inherent sanctity of certain spots remained but were frowned upon by traditionalist Islam. Judeo-Christian traditions were accepted , in fact welcomed, as long as they were in keeping with Islamic teachings




Thus place acquires baraka if it is used for Islamic practices and the Muslims can enrich the heavens with their bodies simply through the practice of being Good Muslims.

The two Islamic concepts of Sacred Place discussed above, the earth as neutral but capable of acquiring sanctity through good deeds, or of all earth as potentially sacred are more flexible and inclusive than a Sacred only possible through a theophany, for example. The Eliadian (and Durkheimian) rift between the Sacred and the Profane becomes blurred and the gulf negotiable by mere mortals. Al-Qarafa contains two opposites: this world and the hereafter, it is thus the best residence. It is also the best repository of the people's sacreds - it combines the magical esoteric promise of transcendence with the populist possibility of baraka through good acts, and that remains the true source of its staying power.

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In this study, ‘Cairo' is used to denote the city as a whole, ‘al-Qahira', the walled square city established by the Fatimids, and ‘al-Fustat', the city whose seed was the settlement established by the Arab conquerors in the area now called Misr al-Qadima.

See Taqiyy al-Din Ahmad al-Maqrizi, Al-mawa‘iz w'al-i‘tibar bi-dhikr al-khitat w'al-athar; (Bulaq, n.d.) II, 443-4; Muwaffaq al-Din Ibn ‘Uthman, 1995, Murshid al-zuwwar ila qubur al-abrar, ed. M. F. Abu Bakr (Cairo, 1995), 11; Shams al-Din Muhammad Ibn al-Zayyat, Al-kawakib al-sayyara fi tartib al-ziyara, ed. A. Taymur (Cairo, 1907), 179 for explanations of the name.

See Yusuf Raghib , “Al-Sayyida Nafisa: Sa legende, son culte et son cimitière”, Studia Islamica 44 (1976) , 61-86

Ibn al-Zayyat, 33. See also Ibn ‘Uthman, 176-7; al-Sakhawi, 128-9

See Jonathan Bloom, “The mosque of the Qarafa in Cairo”, Muqarnas 7 (1987) , 7-21; Yusuf Raghib, “Sur deux monuments funeraires d'al-Qarafa al-Kubra au Caire”, Annales Islamologiques 12 (1974), 67- 83; Suad Maher, 1976, “Hafa'ir kulliyat al-athar bi-zahir madinat al-fustat”, Magazine of the Faculty of Archaeology 1 (1976), 95-126.

Al-Maqrizi I, 486; al-Maqrizi II, 318, 453, 460; Ibn al-Zayyat, 194-5; al-Sakhawi, 289-90.

Muhammad ibn Ahmad Ibn Jubayr, 1907, The Travels of Ibn Jubayr, ed. W. Wright (Leiden, 1907), 40-50.

al-Maqrizi I, 365

From the many ziyara books we know were written, four are still available from the Ayyubid and Mamluk periods. They are, in chronological order, Muwaffaq al-Din Ibn ‘Uthman, Murshid al-zuwwar ila qubur al-abrar, ed. M. F. Abu Bakr (Cairo, 1995); Majd al-Din Muhammad ibn al-Nasikh (also known as Ibn ‘Ayn al-Fudala', Misbah al-dayaji wa ghawth al-raji wa kahf al-laji (Ms. Dar al-Kutub, tarikh 1461; Shams al-Din Muhammad Ibn al-Zayyat, Al-kawakib al-sayyara fi tartib al-ziyara, ed. A. Taymur (Cairo, 1907); Nur al-Din ‘Ali al-Sakhawi, Tuhfat al-Ahbab wa bughyat al-tullab fi al-khitat wa al-mazarat wa al-tarajim wa al-biqa' al-mubaraka, ed. M. Rabi' & H. Qasim (Cairo, 1937).For a chronological list of ziyara books, see Yusuf Raghib, “Essaie d'inventaire chronologiques des guides a l'usage des pelerins du Caire”, REI 41 (1973): 259-80, and Chris Taylor, In the Vicinity of the Righteous: Ziyara and the Veneration of Muslim Saints in Late Medieval Egypt. ( Leiden, 1999), 228-34.

See for example Ibn al-Zayyat, 119; al-Sakhawi, 248-9

See for example Ibn al-Zayyat, 184, 295-7; al-Sakhawi, 298, 379, 380; Ibn ‘Uthman 602-3

See for example Ibn al-Zayyat 109, 180; al-Maqrizi II 450; al-Sakhawi 178, 185, 274, 294.

Jamal al-Din Abu'l-Mahasin Ibn Taghri Bardi, Al-nujum al-zahira fi muluk Misr w'al-Qahira, ed. M. Ramzi (Cairo, 1929), XIV 78, 338; XV 424.

See Ahmad Ibn Taymiyya, Majmu‘ fatawa shaykh al-Islam Ahmad ibn Taymiyya (Riyadh, 1961-7) XXVII; Niels H. Olesen, Culte des saints et pelerinages chez Ibn Taymiyya (Paris, 1991) for the former's views of ziyara and the cult of saints.

See the following for an overview of the discussions of Ibn ‘Arabi in late Medieval Islam. Alexander D.Knysh, Ibn ‘Arabi in the Later Islamic Traditon: The Making of a Polemic Image in Medieval Islam. (State University





The ziyara books mostly do not enter this debate - These books were written by shaykhs who lead the ziyara by profession, the legality of the practice, in fact its importance to good Muslims was a given. For an example of this genre see ‘Ali ibn ‘Abd al-Kafi Al-Subki, Shifa' al-siqam fi ziyarat khayr al-anam. (Hyderabad, 1952)

Ulf Hannerz, Exploring the City; Enquiry toward an Urban Anthropology. (Columbia University Press, 1980), 303

Taylor, 1999, 59-61

Victor Turner, The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure. (New York, 1969) , 94-165

Ibn al-Zayyat 109

Muhamad Ibn al-Hajj, Madkhal al-shar‘ al-sharif , Vol. I (Cairo, 1929), 267

Al-Maqrizi II, 464 quoting Musa ibn Muhammad ibn Sa‘id in al-Mu‘rib ‘an Akhbar al-Maghrib.

Mircea Eliade, The Sacred and the Profane. (San Diego, 1987)

Emile Durkheim, The Elementary Forms of Religious Life. ( New York, 1995)

Seyyed Hossein Nasr, An Introduction to Islamic Cosmological Doctrines. (Harvard University Press, 1964), 4-5

Even in this case, there is a hierarchy; Mecca, then Medina then Jerusalem are the first second and third haram. See al-Subki 117-138 for a comprehensive discussion of this hadith. See also Olesen 1991, 48.

Ibn Taymiyya XXVII, 30. See also Olesen 1991, 31.

id., for Ibn Taymiyya's discussion of the use of this word.

Ibn ‘Uthman, 12

It is used more generally for places than the word haram, which as far as I know is only used for the three main mosques of Islam.

al-Maqrizi II, 444

See baraka in the two editions of the Encyclopedia of Islam. In Lane's dictionary it is translated as blessing, also any good that is bestowed by God. Edward W. Lane, Lane's Arabic English Lexicon. (London, 1863)

J. H. Bousquet, “La baraka, le mana et le dunamis de Jesus”, Revue africaine 91(1947), 166-170

Taylor 1999, 54-5

Ibn Taymiyya takes issue with the use of the word baraka as emanating from mortals even if they are walis or prophets. He believes it should only be used in the context of God, but this is rather an extreme view. Ibn Taymiyya XXVII, 95.

The following is a discussion of the understanding of these myths in the mid 14th C. Their predominance in popular imagination is the issue rather than their historic authenticity.

Ibn ‘Uthman, 8-9. See also al-Maqrizi I, 124; Ibn al-Zayyat, 12-13.

My italics

al-Maqrizi I: 123-4

Ibn ‘Uthman, 9; Al-Maqrizi, 124

Ibn al-Zayyat, 13 (quoting al-Quda‘i). See also Ibn ‘Uthman, 8.

See above

Ibn ‘Uthman, 156-7. See also Abu'l-Qasim Ibn ‘Abd al-Hakam, Futuh Misr wa akhbariha, ed.C. C. Torrey (Cairo, 1991), 5, 140 who is credited with the first account we know of this incident; Ibn al-Zayyat, 13, 85; al-Maqrizi I, 124) Ibn al-Hajj has a different variation of this myth, where the land on which the cemetery was built is described as ‘the soil of paradise or the tomb of paradise (turba). Ibn al-Hajj I, 252-3.

Ibn ‘Uthman, 7; al-Maqrizi I, 124

Al-Maqrizi I, 124-5.

Ibn ‘Uthman, 7; See also al-Maqrizi I, 124-5.

My italics

Clinton Bennett, “Islam”, in ed. J. Holm, Sacred Place. (London 1994), 89

id., 93

Ibn Taymiyya XXVII, 53.

See Muhyi'l-din Ibn ‘Arabi, Al-futuhat al-makiyya, ed. O. Yahya(Cairo, 1972); id., Fusus al-Hikam, ed. A. Afifi (Beirut, 1976); Michel Chodkiewicz, Seal of the Saints (Cambridge 1993); Chittick, 1991





This is what Ibn Taymiyya calls legal visitation (ziyara shar'iyya), ibid.

Ibn Qayim al-Jawziyya's (d. 1350) treatise “The book of the spirit” reviews 19 different views on where the dead go until ressurection days.See Jane I. Smith & Yvonne Y. Haddad, The Islamic Understanding of Death and Ressurection. (State University of New York Press, 1981, 58 for a summary of these views.

This does not mean that this is comparable to the state of living. According to al-Jawziyya, in dar al-dunya, the body is outward and the spirit is unseen, while in dar al-barzakh, the spirit is outward and the bodies are hidden in their graves; Ragnar Eklund, Life between Death and Resurrection according to Islam. (Uppsala, 1941), 95-8. See also, William C. Chittick, “Eschatology” in Islamic Spirituality I, ed. S. H. Nasr (New York, 1987), 378-409.

For example, during the prophet Muhammad's trip to the heavens, he saw Musa (Moses) praying in his grave on his way up, but he also conversed with him in heaven slightly later. Al-Subki, 179-81

Ecklund 1941, 52-54

Smith and Haddad 1981, 54-5

Smith and Haddad 1981, 54-5

Hadith quoted from Muslim. Ibn ‘Uthman, 13.

Ibn ‘Uthman, 12.

Al-Sakhawi, 5.

Taylor 1999, 80

Ibn al-Zayyat, 34

Nasr 1964, 212

Ibn Taymiyya XXVII, 72-95

See Olesen 1991, 13-17 for an account of his trials and incarceration.

Al-Subki 127-131

Taylor 1999, 51-2.

Ibn Taymiyya XXVII, 26Note how Ibn Taymiyya carefully avoids the mix between the dead and the living. The dead can intercede for the other dead buried near them, and it is comendable to seek a grave in their vicinity but not to ask for their intercession while still alive.

This word was mentioned thrice in the Qur'an, twice it meant the point where salt-water and freshwater meet but do not mix. The third time, it is the barrier that prevents the dead from going back to the world of the living (al-dunya) to make amends for past wrongs. (Ecklund 1941, 79-81)

Sura XXIII, 102

Ecklund 1941, 90-1

id., 90-1, 157.

Charles Le Gai Eaton, “Man” in Islamic Spirituality I, ed. S. H. Nasr (New York, 1987), 359

Ecklund 1941, 82

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